

MAN'S WAR WITH THE UNIVERSE

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IT IS not the mystic aspect of reality ruthlessly trampling over the impotent powers of human will and reason which makes the universe seem so grand and august a body of forces. But it is, as in Bertrand Russell's meritorious philosophical argument, the far nobler mysticism of man courageously fighting against the inexorable laws and lugubriousness of reality which forces the prime distinction between the apparent impotence of man and the undeniable omnipotence of universal power and persistent necessity. Both daily and eternally man is at war with relentless Fate, with implacable Time, with the very transcendent and transmutive spectacle of the Universe. But to protect himself nobly as best he can, with courage and sanity and dispassion, the while he carries his torch of culture forward, makes him free; it is the attitude of every free man's worship to yearn for spiritual emancipation, "to abandon the struggle for private happiness, to expel all eagerness of temporary desire, to burn with passion for eternal things," aiming to identify his own meagre aspirations with those vast existences which make up the life of the Universe.

This is a token of consolation and serves our occasional tendency toward spiritual rehabilitation. But going further, beyond the impending probability of our succumbing to the ever-recurrent plague of social chaos and cultural disaster, we feel, dreadfully enough at times, that this comparatively local struggle is but a previsionary and preparatory trial or rehearsal looking forward to an ultimate cosmic failure of human ambition and effort. Man's life, man's origin, growth, aims, experience, ideas, works and destiny—all are as yet not sufficiently adjusted to the eternal integrity of the Universe to share its balance of power, its pure themistic dignity and its inexorable justice. Man's love and faith are yet not sufficiently devout or pure to match the devotional fidelity and creative function of the Divine. Being so much an ephemeral issue of the

dust, man has not yet risen very high in the scale of life; he has ambitions still of the earth earthy and does not yet aspire wholly to be wise and good. How then can he escape the doom of all finite material existences? How can he offer adequate subterfuge to evade inevitable judgment on his narrow, physical, vulgar and worldly affections?—that last day when the solar system has fallen into ruins and the debris of worlds, moons and asteroids smother his poor lukewarm vestal fire to extinction.

Man's life has significance and importance largely by contrast with the inert mass of inorganic matter, with the apparently aimless and indeed unconscious urge of weight, heat, light and buoyancy. He is thrust into a vulgar, dour, material world and must somehow grow erect and give himself prestige over the rancor and wreck of the non-human. But he must not make the all-too-easy mistake of believing that the natural world affords no worthy pattern for his copying, that the non-human phase of existence bears no ritual worthy of his devotion. Nature was there first, long before man or any of his petty purposes obscured the aim and amplitude of life, long before any of his paltry ideas, ambitions, hopes or fears were even in embryo. The non-human zone of reality was a scene of vast effort and achievement long before man ever came to meditate and plan his own devices for ennoblement; it laid out man's powers and possibilities for him in the dim and prehistoric antiquity of the world. To say that man is superior or of priority over Nature is foolish and presumptuous; to hold that he is at all a serious match for the non-human designs and ruthless disposition of the Universe is ridiculous, the clumsy fallacy of pinch-penny minds. It is the usual sophist scheme for giving a man a specious significance and importance in the cosmic game of life and thought and action.

Man is comparatively weak, both in structure and in function, when matched against the forces of Nature, the energies, agencies and destinies already set against him by the external world. The common phrase which seeks to extenuate a man's moral insufficiency by saying "the spirit is willing but the flesh is weak" is in reverse of the true situation, which shows instead (and too sadly often) that the "flesh is willing while the spirit is weak." It is just this spiritual weakness which is the bane of our modern world, leaving us invariably in the lurch just when we are most in need of succor and encouragement. The flesh-pots of a starving culture always invite a greater majority than the porticoes and gardens of philosophy: the finite satisfactions of a specious civilization always bribe more

devotees than ever to make pilgrimage to Mecca or Helicon. Hence, under duress of such conditions we can never rightfully hope for an ushering in of the millenium so long as we obscure our own vision with mistaken maxims and skew-joint apologetics.

Right here I should like to recall a few examples of opinion to show how precariously our modern civilization is placed, and from them to argue the necessity for greater discretion and decision in all our cultural aims and processes. No one will deny, I am sure, that it is largely by means of whatever cultural education and inspiring example we can bring into practical use that we can hope to ever effect any actual departure from the brutalities of life, any actual refinement or spiritual regeneration into a nobler manner of existence.

First, the late Professor Carleton H. Parker's suggestions that social control and the validity of economics to handle modern problems can be had and maintained only as we admit and take counsel of the humanism of motive and instinct, and that most of the unrest and insanity of today are merely the manifestations of the different fallacies of our industrial and political psychoses. Human nature is in constant turmoil and war and riot because there is no honest concern to understand its paradoxical demands, its hungering expectations of recognition and reward from a sterile and vulgarian age. No one is satisfied with the vicary of government, the rules of the game being set for us by others equally individualistic. Our perennial social delinquency results mainly from conditions not suited to the genius and requirements of human nature, conditions which are partly traditional, partly forced, inherited, acquired or otherwise made treacherous adjuncts to human life.

The individualism of might and the collectivism of national imposition, the rhyomism of despotic power as well as the conservative inertia of Bourbon "ideals" are equally fallacious. It is only the *right* between individuals and the justice of proper desert between nations which can ever be truly said to make lasting foundation for peace, prosperity and happiness all around. Without those two basic principles held in full recognition and honest application to daily duty, life will be ever insecure, government will be ever corrupt, and the world will be ever weary with wickedness and war.

Another phase of worthy public opinion is that of the Boston architect, Dr. Ralph Adams Cram, on the very impending possibility of universal degeneracy and man's pitiful political failure to cope even halfway successfully with the social exigencies of the day.

There may well enough be set up nominally the various forms of democratic government, but the inevitable necessity in any case for genius, courage, strong and heroic leadership leaves it largely as it was before—an aristocracy; or, without these, it is really an oligarchy, an olocracy or perhaps a pluto-doulocracy ever threatened with violence and revolt. Dr. Cram holds that the whole nation (America), almost the whole world, seems bewildered by the chaos of its false philosophies, misled by the folly of its passions and betrayed by the insanity of its fake pretige-mongering. We should be astonished at the effrontery of our misleaders, especially in putting up mediocre demagogues to spread false rumors how they intend to salvage us from a well-nigh total perjorism and lead the wandering world out of its tragic crisis. A certain pessimism can be read out of every hegemony creed, every plot to rejuvenate the world, for it is assumed from the very start that humanity is in need of guidance and protection. But this does not minimize the risk we moderns take in our efforts to gain health, wealth and happiness, for the times are critical and the current chaos threatens further rout into the very sanctuary of practically every phase of human activity in religion, literature, art, science, ethics, philosophy and politics, of course. In short, we must share Dr. Cram's final acknowledgement of the adequacy of the title of his volume—that the aristocracy of heroism, genius and ideal social construction is and always will be "the nemesis of mediocrity," it will always qualify the oligarchic limits of every "pure" democracy and will always have sufficient justice and decency to champion the rights of the submerged but not yet wholly drowned majority. Many pessimists and near-cynics will be aroused and perhaps redeemed to a more cheerful outlook by the emphatic prospect that the near future may see the world re-Christianized, unified and connected by irenic revival of the old-time monastic orders. But there will perhaps always be controversial and cultural struggles, for, as an instance, with the Pope never again to be the lone arbiter of civilization, many theologians will be more an intellectual obstacle than an economic vehicle to the re-establishment of a world-wide religion. We are not told how such a bright future would be affected by the cult of the Virgin which, as Henry Adams says, grew up in Twelfth Century France and materialized in the form of Notre Dame cathedrals because *she* appealed to the medieval mind as a merciful means to circumvent the austere paternalism and justice-power of the Trinity.

Man has no just war with the Universe in the same sense that he has an everlasting conflict within himself between his good and evil impulses, between the vital tendencies of both body and spirit. But it is an unavoidable conflict; like Miss Winifred Kirkland's fine introduction to the *new death*, it is an "enforced familiarity with fate that is so far mainly an immense yearning receptivity, an unprecedented humility of both brain and heart toward all the implications of survival. It investigates and does not dogmatize. It practices rather than theorizes. It also demands independence and personality in all its workings." The law of bio-genesis as discovered and now argued by embryologists, is given in terms of palinogenesis, holding that from conception in the womb to maturity and death, man's life physically and mentally repeats the entire evolutionary development of the species. So then could we consider the numerous laboratory experiments, observations, the behavioristic philosophy, and find that there is a close collaboration between biology and psychology in trying to solve the problem of the origin of consciousness, of instinct, reflex appetite, intelligence and fidelity in the evolution of consciousness, and that the terms of this evolution can be used to plat the orbit of our spiritual journey through the Universe, tragic and disastrous though it may often seem to be. *There* there will probably be immediate knowledge and trials of character rather than the superficial pleasantry of novel situations, to intrigue our fancy. No *idées fixes* or *forces Fouillées* will be there to blurb and chirk up like an economic conference or the clerical notes on the Congressional Calendar, for man cannot bluff or wheedle the Universe like he does his ignorant gullible fellows.

In his two great works, *Atala*, and *Le Génie du Christianisme*, Chateaubriand has shown how we can make an orderly and progressive redemption of Christianity from the pseudo-romanticism of melancholy and sorrowing passion, from the *vues gaucheries* of eighteenth century sensationalism, and by means of nature-worship and the recreation of Gothic culture bring the emotional naturalism of Rousseau to its highest expression, its moments of supreme crisis and decision. It is indeed fortunate for us to have in our midst an actual application of this scheme, shorn of its defective demonology and supernaturalism. I refer to Felix Adler's Society for Ethical Culture, the aims and aspirations of which he outlines in his *Ethical Philosophy of Life*. Therein will be found the following exhortations: reverence for the personalities of others, especially women; sympathy and consideration for all who are weary with toil and

heartache; honest cultural aims, including both intellectual development and spiritual ennoblement; the occidentally accepted fact that Christ is the only great pioneer of moral permanence in the ethical progress of the world; the worth and inviolability of the human soul; that any adequate ethical theory, like the valid practice of it, must be independent of theology, politics, industrialism or any other finite worldly interest; that we should not seek but attribute more worth and integrity in others because it is necessary to consider others as moral beings or ethical units of the world-order if one expects to become or act the part of a moral being himself; that the affirmation of the eternal verities, with all superlative values and functions openly attached which are contained and continued in the Universe, is man's highest beatitude, one fully as inevitable and unwavering as ever Rossetti could have promised, one which is the supreme prize anyone can ever wrest from life's unequal struggle, life's faltering ideal, life's chastening experience. Even Doctor Durant's manner of getting at the social problem with a live philosophy combining Spinoza's ethical democracy, Bacon's naturalism and scientific control, Plato's political free-will and Socrates' dynamic aretism, cannot but eventually have real and durable effect even in a vulgarian age, and lead us to the honest social theory of a liberal reconstruction backed up by an inclusive ethical brotherhood and a just economic control of all who take shelter in Solomon's House.

Those who can drive through the bumpy detours of Freud's psychology without shock-absorbers and reciprocal springs will find that much of our savage past is pretty well restrained from an open voice in our present policy or action. If the study of disease can reveal a collateral science of mind and psychic healing, then a conscientious study of our savage inheritance should show further items indicating the scope of our true heredity from Nature, whether it be a descent from the Divine or an ascent from the bestial.

J. W. Wickwar has refuted Freud's sexual theory of dreams on the ground that it springs from the usually brutal Teutonic method of erotic interpretation and is built almost wholly on observation of individuals of low moral type; in fact, as we go higher in the scale of virtue and character the less do we find a savage past forcing expression through the superficial imagery of sleep. To be sure there are instances of multiple psychoses, methectic states in a dual or disturbed personality, but so are there numerous phases of existence in the Universe, various cycles of reality which may or may not be communicable or intelligible to one another. Perhaps there

is no real chaos or madness in the Universe because it is perfect, self-sustaining and functions in complete harmony and integrity. Hence it never suffers from man's war against its rulings and dispositions, although man himself does often break his half-tempered lance in a too violent attack. But, fortunately for most of us, as Oliver Wendell Holmes points out, "a weak mind does not accumulate enough force to hurt itself; stupidity often saves a man from going mad." The proper moderation is not to be like the ephectic philosophers Carneades and Arkesilaos who suspended all judgments and conflicts, but to be like John Stuart Mill whose argument against them and all other sceptics held that "courage and faith are man's greatest weapons against an adverse world; if we were never to act on our opinions because those opinions might be wrong we would leave all our interests uncared for and all our duties unperformed."